



September 2023

ARCTIC REGION

Factors That Facilitate and Hinder the Advancement of U.S. Priorities

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-23-106002](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The United States, by virtue of Alaska, is an Arctic nation and has substantial interests in the region. In recent years, the effects of climate change, technological advancements, and economic opportunities have driven increasing interest and activity in the Arctic region. In addition, there has been an escalation of great power competition between the United States, Russia, and China, which seeks Arctic resources, among other things. This competition has introduced tension into the Arctic's geopolitical environment.

GAO was asked to review the federal government's management of Arctic efforts, including State's current structures for Arctic diplomacy. This report discusses (1) federal entities' roles in managing U.S. Arctic priorities, (2) factors stakeholders identified that may facilitate or hinder the federal government's management of U.S. Arctic priorities, and (3) factors stakeholders identified that may facilitate or hinder State's role in managing U.S. Arctic priorities.

GAO reviewed Arctic strategies, State documentation, and other relevant reports. GAO also interviewed 31 stakeholders, grouping similar stakeholders on the basis of their affiliations to create six groups for GAO's analysis and discussion. These groups were State, other agencies, U.S. experts on Arctic issues, foreign governments of Arctic countries, Alaska Native organizations, and the state government of Alaska. GAO selected these groups to capture a range of perspectives concerning any factors that may facilitate or hinder the federal government's or State's management of U.S. Arctic priorities.

View [GAO-23-106002](#). For more information, contact Chelsa Kenney at (202) 512-2964 or kenneyc@gao.gov.

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What GAO Found

Management roles for advancing U.S. Arctic priorities span the federal government. In October 2022, the federal government published an updated Arctic strategy that serves as a framework for guiding its approach to addressing emerging challenges and opportunities in the Arctic. While many federal entities engage with foreign partners on Arctic issues, the Department of State serves as the lead for Arctic diplomacy efforts. The Biden administration announced that an existing Arctic coordinator position at State would be elevated to an Ambassador-at-Large position in August 2022, but the nominee has yet to be confirmed.

Map of the Arctic Region



— Arctic boundary

Source: GAO (data); Map Resources (map). | GAO-23-106002

Stakeholders identified five factors that facilitated and five factors that hindered the federal government's management of U.S. Arctic priorities. For example, stakeholders identified U.S. Arctic expertise and engagement as factors that facilitated its influence in the Arctic Council. However, some stakeholders said that the Arctic Executive Steering Committee and the broader federal government face various challenges related to interagency coordination that hinder implementation of U.S. Arctic priorities outlined in the 2022 strategy.

Stakeholders identified three factors pertaining to State's structures that facilitated and two factors that hindered State's management of U.S. Arctic priorities. For example, stakeholders identified continuity within the Senior Arctic Official position and supporting office as a factor that has deepened institutional knowledge for Arctic Council work, facilitating efforts to promote U.S. priorities. However, some stakeholders identified gaps in leadership and limited convening authority as factors that had hindered management. Many stakeholders viewed the announcement of the Ambassador-at-Large for the Arctic Region position positively but identified elements State and the new Ambassador should consider to manage U.S. Arctic priorities successfully going forward. These elements include consistency in position and title, a formalized office structure, clarity of Ambassador's role within the department, and greater authority to coordinate with all the relevant bureaus across the department.

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Abbreviations

AESC	Arctic Executive Steering Committee
APG	Arctic Policy Group
DHS	Department of Homeland Security
DOD	Department of Defense
DOE	Department of Energy
DOI	Department of the Interior
DOT	Department of Transportation
EPA	Environmental Protection Agency
FEMA	Federal Emergency Management Agency
HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
MARAD	Maritime Administration
NASA	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
NOAA	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
NSC	National Security Council
NSF	National Science Foundation
NTIA	National Telecommunication and Information Administration
OES	Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs
S/AR	Office of the U.S. Coordinator for the Arctic Region
SAO	Senior Arctic Official
USARC	United States Arctic Research Commission
USCG	U.S. Coast Guard
USDA	U.S. Department of Agriculture
USGS	U.S. Geological Survey

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September 6, 2023

The Honorable James E. Risch
Ranking Member
Committee on Foreign Relations
United States Senate

The Honorable Lisa Murkowski
United States Senate

Current geopolitical trends indicate the Arctic region is growing more important to the United States and its allies and strategic adversaries.¹ Over the past several decades, climate change has caused the Arctic to warm twice as rapidly as the rest of the world. In recent years, the effects of climate change, technological advancements, and economic opportunities have driven increasing interest and activity in the Arctic region. For example, record low coverage of sea ice has made Arctic waters navigable for longer periods and has increased opportunities for shipping in the region.² Warming temperatures will also likely enable more exploration for oil, gas, and minerals in the Arctic region.

¹In general, the Arctic is the polar region located at the northernmost part of the Earth. Arctic stakeholders define the Arctic geographical area in different ways. For example, the Arctic Research and Policy Act of 1984 defines the Arctic as all U.S. and foreign territory north of the Arctic Circle and all U.S. territory north and west of the boundary formed by the Porcupine, Yukon, and Kuskokwim Rivers (in Alaska); all contiguous seas, including the Arctic Ocean and the Beaufort, Bering, and Chukchi Seas; and the Aleutian Chain. Pub. L. No. 98-373, 98 Stat. 1242, 1248 (1984) (codified at 15 U.S.C. § 4111). The Arctic Circle is the line of latitude located at 66° 33' 44" north of the equator. Other definitions of the Arctic use markers such as the southernmost extent of winter sea ice for oceanic boundaries, or the northernmost tree line for terrestrial boundaries.

²We previously reviewed U.S. Arctic shipping trends and agencies' efforts to address Arctic maritime infrastructure gaps. In that report, we recommended that appropriate entities within the Executive Office of the President develop and publish a strategy to address gaps and to designate the interagency mechanism responsible for leading federal efforts. The White House partially addressed this recommendation when it published an updated National Strategy for the Arctic Region in 2022, which identifies the need to improve maritime capabilities in the U.S. Arctic. However, the strategy does not include specific performance measures to monitor federal agencies' progress in implementing the strategic goals and objectives and respond to Arctic risks. GAO, *Maritime Infrastructure: A Strategic Approach and Interagency Leadership Could Improve Federal Efforts in the U.S. Arctic*, [GAO-20-460](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 29, 2020).

Recent studies also indicate climate change will result in billions of dollars' worth of damage to Arctic infrastructure and such changes have implications that extend beyond the Arctic region. The Arctic part of Alaska is home to Alaska Natives who have inhabited the Arctic region for thousands of years and whose ways of life are particularly sensitive to environmental changes. We have previously reported on the threats to Alaska Native villages posed by erosion, flooding, and thawing permafrost and the challenges associated with addressing such threats.³ In addition, other reports have documented the global implications of the widespread changes occurring in the Arctic. For example, scientists at Department of Energy's (DOE) Pacific Northwest National Laboratory found that declines in Arctic sea ice during the summer months are linked to increases in autumn wildfires over the western United States.⁴

Moreover, the escalation of great power competition between the United States, Russia, and China has heightened tensions in the Arctic's geopolitical environment. For example:

- Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 and its military buildup in the Arctic region substantially affected U.S., Canadian, and Nordic relations with Russia.
- Both Russia and China have developed Arctic strategies with geopolitical goals contrary to U.S. interests. According to the U.S. Army's Arctic strategy, Russia seeks to consolidate sovereign claims and control access to the region while China aims to gain access to Arctic resources and sea routes to secure and bolster its military, economic, and scientific rise.

³In this report, we use the terms "Alaska Native village" and "Native village" to refer to federally recognized Tribes located in Alaskan communities. As of April 2022, there were 227 federally recognized Tribes within the state of Alaska, eligible for funding and services from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. 87 Fed. Reg. 4636 (Jan. 28, 2022). See also GAO, *Alaska Native Issues: Federal Agencies Could Enhance Support for Native Village Efforts to Address Environmental Threats*, [GAO-22-104241](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 18, 2022); *Climate Change: A Climate Migration Pilot Program Could Enhance the Nation's Resilience and Reduce Federal Fiscal Exposure*, [GAO-20-488](#) (Washington, D.C.: July 6, 2020); and *Alaska Native Villages: Limited Progress Has Been Made on Relocating Villages Threatened by Flooding and Erosion*, [GAO-09-551](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 3, 2009).

⁴Yufei Zou, Philip J. Rasch, Hailong Wang, et al., "Increasing Large Wildfires Over the Western United States Linked to Diminishing Sea Ice in the Arctic," *Nature Communications*, vol. 12 (2021).

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- In September 2022 and August 2023, the U.S. monitored Chinese and Russian military vessels conducting joint exercises off the coast of Alaska in the Bering Sea and near the Aleutian Islands, respectively.

In 2022, the President announced that an existing Arctic coordinator position at the Department of State would be elevated to an Ambassador-at-Large position. This change followed questions raised by U.S. lawmakers about State's structure for Arctic diplomacy and gaps between Arctic leadership positions.

You asked us to review the federal government's management of Arctic efforts, including State's current structures for Arctic diplomacy. This report examines (1) federal entities' roles in managing U.S. Arctic priorities,⁵ (2) factors stakeholders identified that may facilitate or hinder the federal government's management of U.S. Arctic priorities, and (3) factors stakeholders identified that may facilitate or hinder State's role in managing U.S. Arctic priorities.

To describe federal entities' roles in managing U.S. Arctic priorities, we reviewed relevant federal strategies; relevant agencies' Arctic strategies—including the Department of Defense (DOD), DOE, and the U.S. Coast Guard (USCG); relevant sections of State's *Foreign Affairs Manual*; other State documentation; and relevant published reports by federal entities and think tanks. We also interviewed officials representing various federal entities about their roles in managing U.S. Arctic priorities.

To identify and describe factors that may facilitate or hinder (1) the federal government's management of U.S. Arctic priorities and (2) State's role in managing those priorities, we selected and interviewed 31 stakeholders. We selected these 31 stakeholders to capture a range of perspectives. We grouped similar stakeholders on the basis of their affiliations to create six groups for the purposes of our analysis and discussion (see fig. 1).

⁵For the purposes of this report, we define U.S. Arctic priorities as those priorities outlined in the National Strategy for the Arctic Region (Arctic Strategy), which the federal government most recently updated in October 2022. The 2022 strategy states that the federal government will advance U.S. interests across four mutually reinforcing pillars spanning both domestic and international issues. The four pillars include: (1) security—develop capabilities for expanded Arctic activity; (2) climate change and environmental protection—build resilience and advance adaptation, while mitigating emissions; (3) sustainable economic development—improve livelihoods and expand economic opportunity; and (4) international cooperation and governance—sustain Arctic institutions and uphold international law.

Figure 1: Selected Stakeholder Groups Interviewed for Perspectives on the Federal Government’s Management of U.S. Arctic Priorities

	Stakeholder group name (number of stakeholders)	Description of stakeholder group
	Department of State (9)	Representatives from nine selected State bureaus with Arctic roles ^a
	Other Agencies (6)	Representatives from six other selected federal agencies — Departments of Defense, Energy, and Interior and the U.S. Coast Guard, Environmental Protection Agency, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
	Experts (7)	Seven selected U.S. experts on Arctic issues
	Foreign Governments (5)	Government officials from five other Arctic countries
	Alaska Native Organizations (3)	Alaska Natives serving in three Permanent Participant organizations in the Arctic Council and representing other Alaska Native entities
	State of Alaska (1)	Representatives from one state government, specifically representatives from Alaska’s Office of the Lieutenant Governor and other state government departments

Source: GAO (data); GAO (icons). | GAO-23-106002

Note: We selected these groups to capture a range of perspectives concerning any factors that may facilitate or hinder the federal government’s or State’s management of U.S. Arctic priorities. We grouped similar stakeholders together on the basis of their affiliations to create these six groups for the purposes of our analysis and discussion. We did not meet with all the stakeholders within a given group simultaneously.

^aThis group includes stakeholders from eight bureaus and one office, the Office of the U.S. Coordinator for the Arctic Region, which is not located within a bureau. We will refer to all nine bureaus and offices as “bureaus” in this report.

We analyzed the responses across the six stakeholder groups to identify common themes within and across groups pertaining to factors that facilitate or hinder the federal government’s or State’s efforts. We presented those factors that two or more stakeholder groups identified. Although the data we collected from the 31 stakeholders across the six groups provide insight into the perspectives of various groups, our findings are for illustrative purposes and are not generalizable. For more details on our scope and methodology, see appendix I.

We conducted this performance audit from May 2022 to September 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our

findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Background

The Arctic Council

Arctic issues transcend borders, which increases the importance of cooperation among the Arctic countries as they address common challenges and opportunities (see fig. 2).⁶ The Arctic countries are Canada, the Kingdom of Denmark (Denmark), Finland, Iceland, Norway, the Russian Federation (Russia), Sweden, and the United States. The Ottawa Declaration, signed in 1996 by the eight Arctic countries, formally established the council as an intergovernmental forum with the involvement of Arctic Indigenous communities and others. The eight Arctic countries guide the work of the council through consensus decisions and rotate the chair of the council every 2 years. The focus of the council is to promote cooperation, coordination, and interaction on Arctic issues, particularly those related to environmental protection and sustainable economic development. However, the council's charter expressly excludes matters related to military security.

⁶The Arctic countries all have territory north of the Arctic Circle. The Kingdom of Denmark includes Greenland and the Faroe Islands.

Figure 2: Map of the Arctic Region, as Defined by the Arctic Research and Policy Act^a



Source: GAO (data); Map Resources (map). | GAO-23-106002

^aThe Arctic Research and Policy Act of 1984 defines the Arctic as all U.S. and foreign territory north of the Arctic Circle and all U.S. territory north and west of the boundary formed by the Porcupine, Yukon, and Kuskokwim Rivers (in Alaska); all contiguous seas, including the Arctic Ocean and the Beaufort, Bering, and Chukchi Seas; and the Aleutian Chain. Pub. L. No. 98-373, 98 Stat. 1242, 1248 (1984) (codified at 15 U.S.C. § 4111).

Some entities outside the eight Arctic countries also participate in council activities. For example, certain Arctic Indigenous organizations serve as Permanent Participants in the council. In addition, other entities may apply for observer status; these include non-Arctic states; intergovernmental, interparliamentary, global and regional organizations;

and nongovernmental organizations.⁷ Permanent Participants and observers may attend council meetings and provide input to reports and other projects, but only Arctic countries participate in any decision making.

Permanent Participants in the Arctic Council

The Ottawa Declaration, signed in 1996 by the eight Arctic countries, formally established the council as an intergovernmental forum with the involvement of Arctic Indigenous communities and others. The declaration named three Arctic Indigenous organizations as “Permanent Participants” and opened such status to other Arctic Indigenous organizations that met specified criteria. Six Permanent Participants currently represent Indigenous organizations across the Arctic, and four of the six represent Alaska Natives. A fifth organization, the Saami Council, represents indigenous peoples in the Nordic countries and in Russia. A sixth organization, the Russian Association of Indigenous Peoples of the North, is located across Russia.

Source: GAO analysis of Arctic Council information. | GAO-23-106002

The council has six permanent working groups composed of representatives of Arctic countries and Permanent Participants. The six working groups perform the majority of the council’s technical and scientific work and cover a broad range of issues, including emergency response, protection of the Arctic marine environment, and conservation of Arctic flora and fauna.⁸ In addition to the working groups, the council can establish task forces and expert groups, also composed of representatives of Arctic countries and Permanent Participants, for a limited period to address a specific issue.

Senior Arctic Officials (SAO) are government officials selected by the Arctic countries who manage day-to-day council activities. SAOs meet biannually to review and approve ongoing council work. During SAO meetings, SAOs review the ongoing work and approve reports from the council working groups, task forces, and expert groups to forward to the Arctic Ministers. Arctic countries or Permanent Participants may also propose new projects at these meetings, and SAOs decide which proposals to submit to the Arctic Ministers for approval.

State leads U.S. participation in the Arctic Council and coordinates the related work of four other key federal agencies in the U.S. delegation—the Department of Commerce’s National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA); Department of the Interior’s (DOI) U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA); and USCG. State and these four agencies each serve as a Head of Delegation for

⁷The Arctic Council has approved 13 non-Arctic states, 13 intergovernmental and interparliamentary organizations, and 12 nongovernmental organizations as observers, for a total of 38 observer states and organizations.

⁸We previously reported on key U.S. agencies’ participation in the council and agencies’ actions to implement and manage voluntary council recommendations. We recommended that State work with relevant agencies to develop a strategy identifying direction for agency participation in and resource needs for the council; develop a process to review and track progress on council recommendations; and work with other Arctic countries to develop guidelines for clear and prioritized recommendations. State implemented these recommendations. GAO, *Arctic Issues: Better Direction and Management of Voluntary Recommendations Could Enhance U.S. Arctic Council Participation*, [GAO-14-435](#) (Washington, D.C.: May 16, 2014).

one or more of the council's six working groups. See appendix II for more details regarding U.S. participation in Arctic Council working groups.

Russia became the chair of the Arctic Council in 2021. However, following Russia's invasion of Ukraine in February 2022, the other seven Arctic countries issued a joint statement indicating their intent to temporarily pause their participation in Arctic Council meetings and other work.⁹ These seven Arctic countries announced that they would resume some Arctic Council work in June 2022. The limited resumption of work included projects that did not involve Russia.

In May 2023, the Arctic countries met virtually to acknowledge the conclusion of Russia's chairing of the Arctic Council and accept Norway's offer to chair the council through 2025. According to Arctic Council documents, Norway's priorities as chair will be to promote stability and constructive cooperation. Norway also plans to address four topics identified in the Arctic Council Strategic Plan adopted in 2021: the oceans, climate and environment, sustainable economic development, and people in the North.

U.S. Arctic Policy

The United States has articulated its interests in the Arctic through a series of strategies since the early 1970s. For example, the Nixon administration in 1971 called for the sound and rational development of the Arctic, guided by the principles of minimizing adverse environmental effects, promoting international cooperation, and protecting security interests.¹⁰ The Reagan administration underscored these same priorities, along with promoting scientific research, in 1983 through a National Security Decision Directive.¹¹ In January 2009, the George W. Bush administration issued an Arctic Region Policy, which specified U.S. priorities in the Arctic related to national security, international governance, international scientific cooperation, economic issues,

⁹For this report, we will refer to the period in which seven of the Arctic countries did not participate in Arctic Council meetings as the "Arctic Council pause."

¹⁰National Security Council, *United States Arctic Policy and Arctic Policy Group National Security Decision Memorandum 144* (Washington, D.C.: Dec. 22, 1971).

¹¹White House, *United States Arctic Policy National Security Decision Directive Number 90* (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 14, 1983).

environmental protection, and maritime transportation.¹² The policy recognized, among other things, (1) the need to involve the Arctic's Indigenous communities in decisions that affect them and (2) the ongoing work of the Arctic Council and noted that participation in the council is one way in which the United States promotes its interests in the region. In May 2013, the Obama administration issued a National Strategy for the Arctic Region (Arctic Strategy) that described a list of U.S. interests in the Arctic region and largely mirrored the 2009 policy.¹³ The administration released implementation plans in 2014 and 2016 identifying the methodology, process, and approach for executing the strategy.¹⁴

In October 2022, the Biden administration published an updated Arctic Strategy that serves as a framework for guiding its approach to addressing emerging challenges and opportunities in the Arctic. The strategy identified four pillars (or priorities) spanning domestic and international issues: security, climate change and environmental protection, sustainable economic development, and international cooperation and governance.¹⁵ According to the strategy, five principles guide U.S. work in the Arctic across all four pillars (see fig. 3).

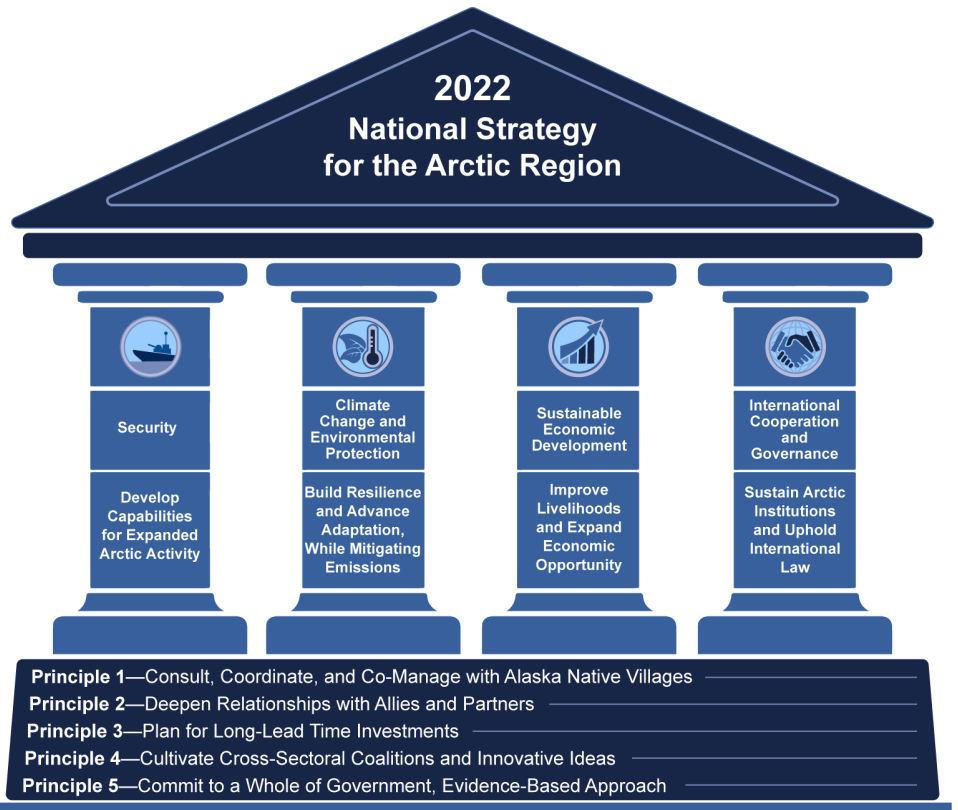
¹²White House, *Arctic Region Policy, National Security Presidential Directive/NSPD-66 and Homeland Security Presidential Directive/HSPD-25* (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 9, 2009). This policy noted that it superseded Presidential Decision Directive/NSC-26, issued in 1994, with respect to Arctic policy.

¹³White House, *National Strategy for the Arctic Region* (Washington, D.C.: May 10, 2013).

¹⁴White House, *Implementation Plan for the National Strategy for the Arctic Region* (Washington, D.C.: Jan. 30, 2014); and *Implementation Framework for the National Strategy for the Arctic Region* (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 9, 2016).

¹⁵The 2022 National Security Strategy also includes Arctic priorities. White House, *National Security Strategy* (Washington, D.C.: Oct. 12, 2022).

Figure 3: Pillars and Principles Outlined in the 2022 National Strategy for the Arctic Region



Source: 2022 National Strategy for the Arctic Region; GAO (icons). | GAO-23-106002

According to AESC’s Executive Director, the Biden administration is expected to publish the corresponding implementation plan in 2023. For each of the major commitments identified in the Arctic Strategy, the implementation plan will outline (1) actions to address the commitment, (2) performance metrics for measuring progress, (3) timelines, and (4) a lead and supporting agencies. The implementation plan will also identify potential external partners to raise awareness and promote outreach going forward.

Management Roles for U.S. Arctic Priorities Span the Federal Government

White House Groups Lead Efforts to Develop and Implement Strategies That Advance U.S. Arctic Priorities

Two White House interagency groups have led efforts to develop Arctic strategies and corresponding implementation plans that advance U.S. Arctic priorities. The National Security Council (NSC) has historically coordinated interagency activity in the U.S. Arctic, starting with the 1971 strategy. A 2015 Executive Order established the interagency Arctic Executive Steering Committee (AESC) to provide guidance to executive departments and agencies and enhance coordination of federal Arctic priorities.¹⁶ Among other things, the AESC was directed to provide guidance and coordinate efforts to implement the priorities, objectives, activities, and responsibilities identified in several Arctic policies, including the 2013 Arctic strategy.

According to AESC's Executive Director, NSC managed the process for developing the 2022 Arctic Strategy, while NSC and the Office of Science and Technology Policy are co-managing the creation of the corresponding implementation plan. AESC's Executive Director is serving as the lead for the Office of Science and Technology Policy in this effort. He explained that the implementation plan for the 2022 Arctic Strategy will outline an approach for executing the strategy and it is expected to be a living document that will need to be reviewed and updated throughout its evolution. He further noted that the Arctic Strategy has a 10-year time frame, whereas much of the draft implementation plan addresses a shorter time frame to prioritize action items to be addressed in the short term.¹⁷

Numerous Federal Entities Work to Advance U.S. Arctic Priorities

Numerous federal entities and interagency groups with varying roles manage U.S. Arctic efforts. For example, over 40 federal entities helped develop the 2022 Arctic Strategy implementation plan, which illustrates the breadth of federal entities with Arctic interests and roles (see table 1).

¹⁶Exec. Order. No. 13689, *Enhancing Coordination of National Efforts in the Arctic*, 80 Fed. Reg. 4191 (Jan. 26, 2015).

¹⁷For example, the Arctic Strategy has a longer-term commitment to build out broadband in the U.S. Arctic, which will take many years. According to AESC's Executive Director, the draft implementation plan addresses the steps that can be taken to expand broadband in the Arctic in the first few years.

Working groups developed the implementation plan for each pillar of the strategy. Each working group included one or more lead entities as well as a number of supporting entities.

Table 1: Federal Entities Developing the 2022 National Strategy for the Arctic Region Implementation Plan, by Pillar

Strategy Pillars and Working Groups				
Federal entity role	Pillar 1 working group: security	Pillar 2 working group: climate change and environmental protection	Pillar 3 working group: sustainable economic development	Pillar 4 working group: international cooperation and governance
Lead	Department of Defense (DOD) Department of Homeland Security (DHS)	Department of Commerce (Commerce): National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Department of the Interior (DOI)	Department of Energy (DOE)	Department of State (State)
Supporting	Commerce: NOAA; National Telecommunication and Information Administration (NTIA) DOE DHS: Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA); U.S. Coast Guard (USCG) State Department of Transportation (DOT): Maritime Administration (MARAD) National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) National Science Foundation (NSF)	Denali Commission DOD DOE Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) DHS: Cybersecurity and Infrastructure Security Agency; FEMA; USCG Department of Housing and Urban Development DOI: U.S. Geological Survey (USGS) State: Office of the Special Presidential Envoy for Climate DOT: MARAD Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) NASA NSF U.S. Arctic Research Commission (USARC) U.S. Department of Agriculture (USDA): Natural Resources Conservation Service; U.S. Forest Service	Denali Commission Commerce: NOAA; NTIA DOD: U.S. Army Corps of Engineers HHS: Indian Health Service DHS: Customs and Border Protection; FEMA; Transportation Security Administration; USCG DOI: Bureau of Indian Affairs; Bureau of Ocean and Energy Management; U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service; USGS Department of Justice State Department of the Treasury DOT: Federal Aviation Administration; MARAD; Pipeline and Hazardous Materials Safety Administration; U.S. Committee on the Marine Transportation System EPA Export-Import Bank of the U.S. Federal Communications Commission Office of the Director of National Intelligence Office of the U.S. Trade Representative U.S. Agency for International Development USARC USDA: Rural Development	Commerce: NOAA DOD DOE DHS: Global Maritime Operational Threat Response Coordination Center; USCG DOI DOT: MARAD EPA NASA NSF Office of Presidential Personnel

Source: Interviews with and documentation from various departments and agencies. | GAO-23-106002

Arctic Executive Steering Committee's (AESC) Interagency Initiatives and Agency Leads

1. Assisting environmentally threatened communities in Alaska (Department of the Interior)
2. Facilitating the transition to renewable energy (Department of Energy)
3. Improving water and sanitation services to Arctic communities (Environmental Protection Agency)
4. Advancing marine science in the Arctic (White House Office of Science and Technology Policy)
5. Advancing safe and environmentally secure Arctic shipping (Department of Homeland Security)
6. Cleaning up Alaska Native lands (Environmental Protection Agency)
7. Arctic 2030, linking funding and foreign policy (Department of State)
8. Sustainable development of critical materials in Alaska (Department of the Interior)

Source: Interview with AESC. | GAO-23-106002

The Arctic is not the only focus for most of these federal entities. For example, the Department of Labor monitors workplace conditions in the United States, including the safety of Alaskan mines and miners operating in permafrost conditions. Other federal entities, such as NOAA and EPA, support U.S. climate change initiatives nationwide, including in the U.S. Arctic.

In addition, a number of domestically focused interagency groups coordinate the U.S. government's management of Arctic priorities. For example, AESC convened several meetings to support agencies' efforts to coordinate on Arctic issues by identifying common priorities. Between December 2021 and July 2022, AESC members developed and approved eight interagency initiatives, according to AESC's Executive Director. For one of these initiatives, AESC brought together several agencies with responsibility for cleaning up contaminated sites on Alaska Native lands.

Other interagency groups address specific Arctic issues or efforts, such as research in the Arctic region, or include Arctic issues within their broader focus. Table 2 describes the missions of various interagency groups as they relate to the Arctic.

Table 2: Examples of U.S. Interagency Groups and Their Missions as They Relate to the Arctic

Interagency group	Mission as it relates to the Arctic
Arctic Executive Steering Committee (AESC)	Provides guidance to approximately 20 federal departments and agencies to enhance coordination of federal Arctic policies and activities. Coordinates with State, local, Alaska Native village governments and Alaska Native organizations, academic and research institutions, and the private and nonprofit sectors to address the needs of Americans living in the Arctic and to advance U.S. interests in the region.
Interagency Arctic Research Policy Committee	Develops national Arctic research policy and a 5-year plan to implement the policy. Coordinates with 18 federal agencies, departments, and offices on scientific monitoring and research on local, regional, and global environmental issues in the Arctic.
Task Force on the Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area	Coordinates regulatory, policy, and research activities affecting the Northern Bering Sea Climate Resilience Area through an interagency group comprising 17 federal departments, agencies, and commissions. Engages in regular consultation with an intergovernmental Tribal Advisory Council to facilitate consultation with Alaska Native village governments. ^a
U.S. Arctic Research Commission	Develops an integrated national Arctic research policy. Promotes Arctic research and builds cooperative links for such research between the federal government, the State of Alaska, and international partners.
U.S. Committee on the Marine Transportation System	Coordinates the establishment of domestic transportation policies in the Arctic to ensure safe and secure maritime shipping. Assesses and reports on the state of the marine transportation system through periodic performance reports, makes recommendations related to federal policy pertaining to marine transportation systems, and promotes the integration of the marine transportation system with other modes of transportation through a Coordination Board that includes over 25 federal agencies and offices.

Source: GAO analysis of publically available information. | GAO-23-106002

^aThe Tribal Advisory Council was established in April 2022 through a partnership of the Association of Village Council Presidents, Kawerak Inc., the Bering Sea Elders Group, and the Aleut Community of St. Paul Island. Representation includes over 70 Tribes from the Northern Bering Sea region.

While Many Federal Entities Engage with Foreign Partners on Arctic Issues, State Serves as the Lead for Arctic Diplomacy Efforts

Functional and Regional Bureaus Implement or Help to Inform Arctic Efforts

Although many federal entities engage with foreign partners on Arctic issues, including through involvement in the Arctic Council, State serves as the overall lead for Arctic diplomacy efforts. Specifically, one State office focuses on the Arctic Council portfolio, while another coordinates the broader Arctic portfolio within State. Other State bureaus support Arctic diplomacy efforts through bilateral relationships and other efforts. Arctic functions span at least 10 bureaus and offices within State, as shown in table 3.

Table 3: Department of State Bureaus and Offices with Arctic Functions

Bureau	Office	Description of Arctic functions
Office of the Secretary	Office of the U.S. Coordinator for the Arctic Region	Leads and coordinates the advancement of U.S. interests in the Arctic related to safety and security, sustainable economic growth, and strengthening cooperation among Arctic countries to perpetuate and defend the rules-based order in the region.
Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs	Office of Ocean and Polar Affairs	Develops and coordinates U.S. policy affecting Antarctica and the Arctic, including policy related to marine mammals and marine science affairs. Coordinates U.S. participation in all international oceans agreements and conventions and U.S. participation in the Arctic Council.
Bureau of Western Hemisphere Affairs	Office of Canadian Affairs	Supports the U.S. and Canadian relationship, including efforts to foster bilateral discussions on Arctic-specific issues. Monitors Canada's Arctic efforts, including Canada's commitment to the North American Aerospace Defense Command modernization efforts.
Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs	Office of Northern European, Baltic, and Arctic Security Affairs	Supports U.S. bilateral relationships with Arctic countries in Europe. Develops and coordinates policy on U.S. security interests in the European Arctic region.
Bureau of Arms Control, Verification and Compliance	Office of Emerging Security Challenges	Provides analysis, options, and recommendations to various State officials on all policy, programmatic, technical, and threat issues related to Arctic and Antarctic security.
Bureau of Political-Military Affairs	n/a	Builds security partnerships to advance U.S. national security objectives, including in the Arctic. Serves as State's principal link to the Department of Defense.

Bureau	Office	Description of Arctic functions
Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation	Office of Policy Coordination	Identifies and considers ways to address proliferation and other security-related concerns in the Arctic. Works with allies and partners to ensure that global nonproliferation agreements, norms, and practices are fully implemented in the Arctic region.
Bureau of Energy Resources	n/a	Provides subject matter expertise on energy issues to support and complement the efforts of others at State working on Arctic issues.
Bureau of Economic and Business Affairs	n/a	Expands economic opportunities for U.S. businesses overseas and supports efforts to project global leadership through economic diplomacy and development, including in the Arctic.
Bureau of Intelligence and Research	n/a	Delivers and coordinates objective intelligence to support U.S. diplomacy in the Arctic.

Legend: n/a = not applicable.

Source: GAO analysis of Department of State and other publicly available information. | GAO-23-106002

A senior official located in the Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs (OES) serves as the U.S. Senior Arctic Official (SAO) for the Arctic Council, and OES staff support the U.S. role in the council. The SAO leads two separate interagency coordination efforts to support information sharing on Arctic Council-related matters and on Arctic issues more broadly.

- Arctic Council-specific coordination.** The SAO and other OES staff coordinate U.S. government participation in the subsidiary bodies of the Arctic Council. The subsidiary bodies include working groups, expert groups, and task forces. Subject matter experts from each of the participating U.S. agencies meet as a group at least six to eight times a year to discuss Arctic Council work, according to OES officials. These officials further noted that this coordination ensures that all U.S. government participants have a consistent approach to Arctic Council work. Moreover, collegial relationships have allowed State and the other participating U.S. agencies to identify pitfalls and opportunities when reviewing potential council projects. For example, this coordination supported U.S. efforts to identify council projects that could resume without Russian participation following the pause of Arctic Council work in response to Russia's invasion of Ukraine.
- Arctic Policy Group (APG).** APG is an informal information-sharing mechanism that is not specific to the Arctic Council, according to OES officials. Rather, participants meet monthly to share information about ongoing U.S. government Arctic work. The SAO provides updates on Arctic Council issues at the monthly meetings; others present also share updates on the Arctic-related work their departments or agencies are conducting. As of June 2023, this group consisted of officials from approximately 40 federal entities. See appendix III for a

list of departments, agencies, and other federal entities participating in the group.

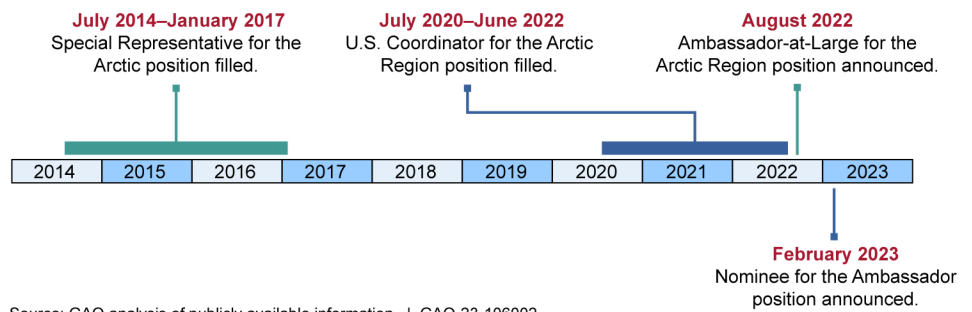
Many State bureaus and U.S. embassies and consulates overseas support Arctic diplomacy efforts outside of the Arctic Council as well. According to State officials, regional bureaus and U.S. embassies take the lead on bilateral relationships with each of the other seven Arctic countries. The U.S. officials in embassies and consulates serve as the eyes and ears on the ground, continuously reporting on a myriad of topics of interest to the U.S. government. The two regional bureaus covering the Arctic region have established new positions called Arctic Watchers to focus specifically on Arctic issues in some U.S. posts. A State official explained that within the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs, the new “watcher” positions at two embassies have portfolios that range from monitoring whaling issues and what China is doing in the region to facilitating scientists’ travel in the area. The regional bureaus rely on reporting from the field to inform decision-making. These bureaus also provide support to other State bureaus and offices working on Arctic issues by developing talking points, papers, and other materials on the basis of reporting from U.S. embassies and consulates.

Other functional bureaus provide subject matter expertise and intelligence to support the U.S. role in Arctic efforts. For example, officials in two bureaus said they rely on the Bureau of Energy Resources for subject matter expertise when preparing for meetings on energy resource development with Arctic partner countries. The bureau plays a leadership role in building supply chains for critical minerals in coordination with foreign partners, according to officials from the Bureau of Energy Resources. The Bureau of International Security and Nonproliferation tracks current and potential proliferation, sanctions, and security concerns, including those in the Arctic region. According to an official from this bureau, experts in this bureau work with OES, State’s lead on environmental issues, to identify potential biological threats related to thawing permafrost in the Arctic, as witnessed with the anthrax outbreak in Siberia in 2016. The bureau also provides expertise on the use of civil nuclear energy in the region.

State Has Created Other Arctic Leadership Positions with Varying Roles and Gaps over Time

Since 2014, State has created several Arctic-related leadership positions with varying titles and roles. There were time gaps between the establishment of the various positions, and the second and third positions replaced the preceding position. An official served in an acting capacity in the period between the second and third positions (see fig. 4).

Figure 4: Timeline Showing Different Arctic-related Leadership Positions at State



Source: GAO analysis of publicly available information. | GAO-23-106002

- Special Representative for the Arctic.** In 2014, State established this position to support the U.S. Chair of the Arctic Council, among other roles. The Special Representative helped amplify public messaging about U.S. Arctic priorities while the United States chaired the council and OES was planning and implementing the chair activities, according to State officials. When the person serving in this role retired from federal service, the associated Arctic region-specific office (S/AR) went into “hiatus” because State did not have a plan in place to address the gap in leadership within the office, according to a State official.
- U.S. Coordinator for the Arctic Region.** In 2020, State created this position and reactivated S/AR to coordinate the relevant bureaus across the department on Arctic issues, including security issues, more broadly. This position (1) coordinated within State to ensure that State spoke with a unified voice on Arctic issues and (2) represented State at NSC and other interagency activities, according to State officials. The Foreign Service Officer serving in this role left the office in June 2022. Since the departure of the U.S. Coordinator in June 2022, the State Counselor has assumed senior-level oversight over Arctic policy and coordination throughout the department. S/AR has largely had one official working in the office in the period following the U.S. Coordinator’s departure.¹⁸
- Ambassador-at-Large for the Arctic Region.** In August 2022, the Biden administration announced that it would be elevating the coordinator position to that of an Ambassador-at-Large, a Senate-confirmed position. The Biden administration nominated Mike Sfraga,

¹⁸According to State officials, S/AR had four full-time positions under the U.S. Coordinator following the U.S. Coordinator’s departure, but not all of these positions were filled.

current Chair of the U.S. Arctic Research Commission, for this position in February 2023.

According to State officials, State continues to discuss this new position internally and is developing the final details of the Ambassador's role, which will build on and go beyond that of the prior U.S. Coordinator position. S/AR hired an additional full-time employee who started in April 2023. It has vacancies for a staff assistant and a chief of staff that it plans to fill when the Ambassador comes on board, while it hopes to hire an additional policy advisor in the future. The Ambassador position will not serve as the SAO for the Arctic Council, and the Ambassador's office will be located outside of OES, in the Office of the Secretary, and will report to the Secretary or the Secretary's designee, according to State officials.

Stakeholders Identified Five Factors That Facilitate and Five That Hinder the Federal Government's Management of U.S. Arctic Priorities

Interagency Coordination and Engagement with Foreign Partners Facilitate the Federal Government's Management of U.S. Arctic Priorities

Five factors have facilitated the federal government's management of U.S. Arctic priorities, according to our analysis of the six stakeholder groups' perspectives (see fig. 5). These factors include various interagency coordination mechanisms and U.S. engagement with foreign governments.

Figure 5: Stakeholder Groups Identified Five Factors That Facilitate the Federal Government's Management of U.S. Arctic Priorities

Factors that facilitate the federal government's management of U.S. Arctic priorities	Stakeholder groups that identified each factor
White House-led coordination mechanisms support Arctic-related information sharing, projects, and strategy efforts	
Other U.S. coordination mechanisms support Arctic-related information sharing	
U.S. messaging helps identify Arctic priorities	
The United States exerts influence within the Arctic Council	
U.S. engagement with foreign governments outside the Arctic Council encourages broader cooperation	

Department of State
 Other Agencies
 Experts
 Foreign Governments
 Alaska Native Organizations
 State of Alaska

Source: GAO (data); GAO (icons). | GAO-23-106002

White House-led Coordination Mechanisms Support Arctic-related Information Sharing, Projects, and Strategy Efforts



White House-led coordination groups serve as mechanisms that support information sharing, interagency Arctic projects, and Arctic strategy efforts, according to stakeholders from four of the six groups. For example, NSC and AESC promote Arctic-related information sharing, according to stakeholders from two groups—State and Other Agencies. Specifically, two stakeholders from the Other Agencies group emphasized the importance of having multiple coordination mechanisms within the White House to address various needs. One of these stakeholders noted that AESC is a vital forum for broader Arctic discussion and information sharing because much of NSC’s work is classified. In addition, a stakeholder from the State group explained that AESC meetings are a useful venue for State to provide briefings about current geopolitical issues that may inform U.S. activities in the Arctic and to learn more about other agencies’ work in the Arctic for informational purposes. Stakeholders from both groups also praised AESC’s efforts to coordinate federal travel to Alaska in an effort to limit the burden that federal visits place on local communities.

In addition, stakeholders from two groups—the State of Alaska and Other Agencies—highlighted AESC’s efforts to coordinate some interagency projects in the Arctic. For example, stakeholders from the State of Alaska group discussed AESC’s coordination of federal government efforts to clean contaminated lands owned by Alaska Natives, an initiative led by EPA and supported by other agencies. According to an AESC official and stakeholders from the Other Agencies group, AESC used a bottom-up approach to identify potential projects on which agencies could coordinate in the Arctic. A stakeholder from the Other Agencies group further noted that the agencies’ role in identifying these projects serves as a source of motivation for these efforts going forward.

Stakeholders from three of the six groups praised NSC’s or AESC’s oversight of the development of the 2022 Arctic Strategy and corresponding implementation plan. For example, stakeholders from the Other Agencies group said that AESC and NSC had provided clear guidance for developing the implementation plan. Specifically, one of these stakeholders shared that AESC, which focuses on domestic issues, and NSC, which typically manages security issues, are coordinating “hand in glove” to provide clear, consistent, and well-coordinated communication throughout the process. Another stakeholder said that NSC and AESC asked agencies to (1) include both current and planned agency activities in the implementation plan that will address commitments outlined in the Arctic Strategy and (2) be ambitious in developing the implementation plan, even if funding for such activities

Other U.S. Coordination Mechanisms Support Arctic-related Information Sharing



was not yet available. The Executive Director of AESC said he expects the implementation plan to evolve over time, which will support agencies' efforts to focus on completing actionable work in the short-term and adjust their efforts to address longer-term goals. Stakeholders from the Other Agencies group said this approach would improve accountability for agencies' implementation of the Arctic Strategy.

Other U.S. coordination mechanisms—such as other interagency groups and agency-specific offices, positions, and mechanisms—facilitate interagency coordination or improve internal agency Arctic management, according to stakeholders from three of the six groups.

Interagency groups. Stakeholders from two of the six groups described the benefits of participating in multiple interagency groups that address U.S. Arctic priorities. For example, participating in various interagency groups helps agencies identify potential areas for collaboration where agency policy priorities may overlap, according to a stakeholder from the State group. Stakeholders from the Other Agencies group said that having multiple interagency groups addressing U.S. Arctic priorities enables each group to focus on different components of Arctic work. These stakeholders explained that breaking down Arctic issues into specific or thematic areas enables thoughtful and thorough discussion among key agencies, helping them to bring the right actors to the table and tackle issues more efficiently.

Stakeholders from all three groups identified the Arctic Policy Group (APG)—an interagency information-sharing mechanism led by the SAO—as an informal tool for increasing participants' awareness of ongoing U.S. engagement in the Arctic. For example, State has relied on APG meetings to identify topics for bilateral discussions with Arctic partners, according to a stakeholder from the State group. A stakeholder from the Experts group stated that APG serves as a better mechanism for interagency information sharing than AESC because APG informs working-level officials who conduct the day-to-day work on Arctic issues. In contrast, higher-level officials attend AESC meetings and, according to this stakeholder, information from these meetings rarely trickles down to the working-level officials. A stakeholder from the State group shared a similar perspective.

Agency-specific offices, positions, and mechanisms. Other agency-specific offices, positions, and mechanisms facilitate interagency coordination or improve internal agency Arctic management, according to stakeholders from the three groups. Stakeholders from the State and

Other Agencies groups said having an Arctic-focused office or position that serves as a point of contact for external collaboration on Arctic issues enables consistent engagement with outside entities. For example, DOE's Arctic Energy Office serves as a point of contact for Alaska Native communities and other agencies working on Arctic-related energy issues. Additionally, USCG personnel serve as liaisons within State to facilitate Arctic coordination between the two agencies, according to stakeholders from the State and Other Agencies groups.

In addition, State's communication and information sharing facilitates interagency coordination and diplomatic engagement with Arctic foreign partners outside of the Arctic Council, according to stakeholders from the State and Other Agencies groups. For example, a stakeholder from the Other Agencies group said their agency works with various State offices and U.S. embassies in the Arctic region to understand what people from the Arctic need so that it can respond directly to those needs. In addition, stakeholders from this group discussed how State's willingness to tap into other agencies' expertise, including technical expertise, can help it be better informed in its interactions with foreign counterparts. However, another stakeholder from this group suggested that State consult closely with relevant federal entities when high-level State officials speak broadly on U.S. Arctic priorities to ensure that recipient audiences have a clear understanding of the federal entities involved in such work.

U.S. Messaging Helps Identify Arctic Priorities



The federal government's messaging identifies U.S. Arctic priorities to both foreign and domestic entities, according to stakeholders from five of the six groups. For example, stakeholders from the Foreign Governments group said they interact with various leaders across the federal government on Arctic issues and it appears the federal government has a clear and coordinated message. In addition, a stakeholder from the Other Agencies group stated that the 2022 Arctic Strategy facilitates collaboration with external partners, because U.S. agencies can point to the strategy to explain why they are prioritizing certain work in the region.

In addition, the 2022 Arctic Strategy clarified the administration's priorities for the federal government and helps agencies determine where to allocate staff and resources, according to stakeholders from the State and Other Agencies groups. A stakeholder from the Other Agencies group stated that the 2013 and 2022 Arctic strategies also help to clarify each agency's Arctic roles. Such clarification may help alleviate potential fragmentation, overlap, and duplication that may occur when multiple

agencies work to address the same broad issue area if they are not coordinating effectively.¹⁹

While stakeholders from five of the six groups discussed ways in which the federal government’s messaging identifies U.S. Arctic priorities, a few stakeholders from the State of Alaska and Other Agencies groups provided a contrary opinion. For example, one stakeholder from the Other Agencies group said that prioritization within the 2022 Arctic Strategy and corresponding implementation plan is important because the number of commitments in the strategy currently exceeds available resources.

The United States Exerts Influence within the Arctic Council



The federal government exerts influence in the Arctic Council through its expertise and engagement, according to stakeholders from five of the six groups. For example, a stakeholder from the Foreign Governments group said the federal government brings expertise to the council on various issues, including wildfires, search and rescue, climate change, and sustainable development. The stakeholder further noted that the more a country engages in Arctic Council projects, the more opportunities it has to build bridges with other Arctic countries and expand the Arctic community’s knowledge on these topics. Some stakeholders also highlighted the strength of U.S. expertise pertaining to diplomacy, which a stakeholder from the Foreign Governments group said is important for operating within the parameters of the Arctic Council’s consensus-based decision-making model. Another stakeholder from this group said the United States was less active in the council in the past but has maintained a proactive approach to Arctic work since it chaired the council from 2015 through 2017.

¹⁹Fragmentation refers to those circumstances in which more than one federal agency (or more than one organization within an agency) is involved in the same broad area of national need and opportunities exist to improve service delivery. Overlap occurs when multiple agencies or programs have similar goals, engage in similar activities or strategies to achieve them, or target similar beneficiaries. Duplication occurs when two or more agencies or programs are engaged in the same activities or provide the same services to the same beneficiaries. GAO, *2023 Annual Report: Additional Opportunities to Reduce Fragmentation, Overlap, and Duplication and Achieve Billions of Dollars in Financial Benefits*, [GAO-23-106089](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 14, 2023); *Fragmentation, Overlap, and Duplication: An Evaluation and Management Guide*, [GAO-15-49SP](#) (Washington, D.C.: Apr. 14, 2015).

U.S. Engagement with Foreign Governments outside the Arctic Council Encourages Broader Cooperation



U.S. engagement with foreign governments outside of the council further supports bilateral engagement, according to stakeholders from three of the six groups. For example, stakeholders from the Other Agencies group told us they have extensive relationships with Canada and Norway for coordination and information sharing on various topics, including conservation, energy development, and species protection. One stakeholder from the Foreign Governments group highlighted their appreciation for their long-standing collaboration with the National Science Foundation on Arctic research. The stakeholder further noted that agency officials' research backgrounds enable the two governments to knowledgeably discuss potential research projects and jointly plan these efforts.

Moreover, all the stakeholders from the Foreign Governments group said they regularly engage with State officials in various bureaus to address Arctic-related issues of importance to their governments. For example, several of these stakeholders discussed frequent interactions with officials in the Bureau of European and Eurasian Affairs pertaining to Arctic security issues. One stakeholder noted that such engagement has increased since Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. In addition, some of these stakeholders mentioned that the U.S. government consulted them before the release of the 2022 Arctic Strategy. One of these stakeholders said the ongoing communication throughout the U.S. strategy development process represented an excellent example of close collaboration between Arctic countries.

Limited Engagement with Alaskans, Budget Concerns, and Other Factors Hinder the Federal Government's Management of U.S. Arctic Priorities

Five factors have hindered the federal government's management of U.S. Arctic priorities, according to our analysis of the six stakeholder groups' perspectives (see fig. 6). These factors include limited engagement with Alaskans, coordination obstacles, and budget uncertainties.

Figure 6: Stakeholder Groups Identified Five Factors That Hinder the Federal Government's Management of U.S. Arctic Priorities

Factors that hinder the federal government's management of U.S. Arctic priorities	Stakeholder groups that identified each factor
Federal government coordination and partnership with Alaskans may not align with Arctic Strategy principles	
U.S. Arctic priorities may not align with other stakeholders' Arctic priorities	
Some challenges to Arctic-related interagency coordination exist, and a lead coordinating group lacks authority to advance U.S. priorities	
Americans have limited awareness of Arctic issues and U.S. government activities	
Budgetary and resource constraints limit the federal government's advancement of U.S. Arctic priorities	

Department of State
 Other Agencies
 Experts
 Foreign Governments
 Alaska Native Organizations
 State of Alaska

Source: GAO (data); GAO (icons). | GAO-23-106002

Federal Government Coordination and Partnership with Alaskans May Not Align with Arctic Strategy Principles



Stakeholders from three of the six groups said that the federal government does not regularly or meaningfully coordinate or partner with the state government of Alaska or Alaska Natives, falling short of meeting certain principles of the 2022 Arctic Strategy.²⁰ The stakeholder from the State of Alaska group said that although the state government engages with some federal agencies and interagency groups, the U.S. government makes decisions about Alaska and for Alaskans without considering the state's perspective or capabilities. For example, this stakeholder said there was no dialogue between the state and federal government and little opportunity to provide meaningful feedback on the 2022 Arctic Strategy, although the federal government did share the strategy with the State of Alaska prior to its release. In addition, this stakeholder told us that while some interagency groups reach out to speak with state

²⁰The 2022 Arctic Strategy identifies four pillars, or Arctic priorities, and five guiding principles, two of which apply to Alaska Natives. The first principle is to consult, coordinate, and co-manage with Alaska Native villages and communities. According to the strategy, the U.S. is committed to regular, meaningful, and robust consultation, coordination, and co-management with Alaska Native Tribes, communities, corporations, and other organizations and to ensuring equitable inclusion of Indigenous Peoples. The fifth guiding principle is to commit to a whole of government, evidence-based approach, in which the U.S. government will work in close partnership with the State of Alaska, Alaska Native villages, local communities, and others.

departments, the state government is not yet seeing results of this outreach.

Similarly, stakeholders from the Alaska Native Organizations group provided examples of their engagement with some federal agencies, but all of these stakeholders questioned whether agencies fully considered their input. For example, a stakeholder from this group said he had spoken with various U.S. military entities regarding training exercises in the region and their effect on wild game. However, the same stakeholder stated that Alaska Native villages keep bringing up the same issues with federal agencies, and noted that if the dialogue were truly “meaningful” the issues raised would change over time. Another stakeholder raised concerns about federal agencies’ inconsistent communication and last-minute engagement with Alaska Natives. For example, an agency might provide a document to an Alaska Native organization for review and input one day before an event, and the stakeholder questioned whether the agency could review and consider the input in such a short time frame.

Moreover, the Arctic Council pause limited Permanent Participants’ engagement with the Arctic Council,²¹ according to stakeholders from the Alaska Native Organizations group.²² Specifically, one of these stakeholders asserted that Arctic countries were making decisions about Arctic Council work without involving the Permanent Participants. The perception was that the Arctic countries believed they did not have to follow agreed upon procedures, such as consulting with the Permanent Participants, because they were working informally outside the Arctic Council framework. A stakeholder from the State group agreed that the Arctic Council pause resulted in challenges to coordination and work within the council but said that State continued to communicate with Alaska-based Permanent Participants on issues related to the council during this period. In addition, Norway has indicated that engagement with the Permanent Participants will be an important feature of its tenure as chair, according to this stakeholder.

²¹In response to Russia’s invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, the other seven Arctic Council member countries announced a pause in their participation on March 3, 2022. In May 2023, the Arctic countries and Permanent Participants met virtually to acknowledge the conclusion of Russia’s tenure as chair of the Arctic Council and accept Norway’s offer to chair the council through 2025.

²²We interviewed representatives from Alaska Native organizations that served as Permanent Participants to the Arctic Council in October and November 2022, during the Arctic Council pause.

Stakeholders from the Alaska Native Organizations and Other Agencies groups indicated that a lack of funding and capacity make it difficult for Alaska Natives to engage with the federal government. For example, a stakeholder from the Alaska Native Organizations group explained that each agency wants to hold separate meetings with Native villages and noted that villages have limited capacity for hosting such meetings. Stakeholders from the Other Agencies group echoed these comments, stating that Alaska Native villages need more funding to increase their bandwidth for these interactions. These stakeholders suggested that the federal government develop mechanisms to provide funding to Alaska Native villages for capacity building, which would in turn support relationships between Native villages and the federal government.

Similarly, all three stakeholders from the Alaska Native Organizations group identified limited resources and capacity as a factor that hinders their engagement with the Arctic Council. According to two of these stakeholders, State provides travel-related funding to Alaska-based Permanent Participants for Arctic Council meetings. However, the two stakeholders explained that they rely on volunteers to complete Arctic Council-related work because their organizations do not have funding for office space or staff. In contrast, both stakeholders' Canadian counterparts receive additional funding from the Canadian government to enhance their capacity to engage in the Arctic Council.²³ However, a stakeholder from the State group said the agency provides funding to Alaska-based Permanent Participants from a federal award to facilitate their engagement in the Arctic Council. According to this stakeholder, State holds regular discussions with the Alaska-based Permanent Participants on the use of these funds, including requests for additional or expanded uses of resources under the federal award.²⁴

²³Some of the Permanent Participant groups represent Indigenous people living across the United States and Canada. These groups may have delegations to the Arctic Council from both the United States and Canada.

²⁴For example, a stakeholder from the State group noted that when COVID-19 resulted in virtual Arctic Council work in 2020, State approved additional uses of funds in the federal award to facilitate virtual participation, such as the purchase of computers and internet connectivity expenses.

U.S. Arctic Priorities May Not Align with Other Stakeholders' Arctic Priorities



U.S. Arctic priorities may not align with other stakeholders' Arctic priorities, according to stakeholders from four of the six groups. While some stakeholders from the Foreign Governments group noted that the four pillars in the 2022 Arctic Strategy generally aligned with their countries' priorities for the region, they expressed concern that security issues—listed first in pillar 1—could overshadow other priorities such as economic development and climate issues.²⁵ For example, stakeholders from this group stated that the United States could do more to promote U.S. commercial opportunities in the region to address economic development priorities.²⁶

Stakeholders from the Alaska Native Organizations group said that U.S. Arctic priorities may not align with their priorities. For example, one of these stakeholders said the climate crisis presented a greater threat to the United States than the military threat posed by Russia and China. This stakeholder said that climate change had contributed to the collapse of the Yukon River salmon population and food insecurity for some Native villages that depend on the salmon.

The stakeholder from the State of Alaska group also said that U.S. Arctic priorities may not align with state priorities. For example, according to the stakeholder, the federal government's Arctic Strategy does not address the state's dependence on revenues from oil and gas development for addressing infrastructure needs in the state. The stakeholder contrasted this with the state's Arctic policy, noting that it includes recommendations about resource development and the use of revenues from such resources to support Alaskan communities that lack basic infrastructure, such as police stations, hospitals, clean water, and sewer drainage.

²⁵According to the Executive Director of AESC, the four pillars of the strategy do not appear in order of priority and all four pillars are equally important.

²⁶State officials noted that the department's fiscal year 2024 budget request for Professional and Cultural Exchanges includes \$750,000 for the Arctic Exchange Program to foster more significant ties between business communities in North America and Greenland.

Some Challenges to Arctic-related Interagency Coordination Exist, and a Lead Coordinating Group Lacks Authority to Advance U.S. Priorities



Although some stakeholders identified certain aspects of interagency coordination that facilitate the federal government’s management of U.S. Arctic priorities, stakeholders from five of the six groups also discussed Arctic-related interagency coordination challenges. For example, a stakeholder from the Alaska Native Organizations group said that agencies need to collaborate better on issues where responsibilities span multiple agencies to identify the agency with appropriate jurisdiction for a specific issue. According to this stakeholder, multiple agencies claim they do not have jurisdiction for addressing a concern related to monitoring caribou herds that travel between Alaska and Canada, and none of these agencies are able to identify the agency with such jurisdiction.

More broadly, all seven experts we spoke with said the United States lacks an effective interagency coordination mechanism for Arctic efforts as a whole. The experts disagreed on where such a mechanism should reside, but several said AESC has the potential to meet this need. However, AESC does not have the institutional convening or budgetary authority needed to advance U.S. Arctic priorities, according to stakeholders from the Other Agencies and Experts groups. For example, stakeholders from the Experts group said that AESC lacks the authority it needs to convene the correct individuals or compel them to implement AESC initiatives. A stakeholder from the Other Agencies group told us that AESC’s convening power is based on goodwill and that AESC does not have the same convening authority as NSC. Stakeholders from the Experts group suggested that codifying AESC would increase its authority and enhance coordination.²⁷

Moreover, AESC leadership can influence the advancement of Arctic projects, but does not have budgetary authority to fund them, according to stakeholders from the Other Agencies and Experts groups. Although Executive Order 13689 assigned agencies responsibility for providing administrative support and additional resources to support their participation in AESC, as appropriate,²⁸ one of these stakeholders said that the lack of additional resources turns agencies away from considering any new work conceived by AESC leadership. This stakeholder also stated that when White House leadership tries to

²⁷The Biden administration reactivated AESC in September 2021, following a 4-year period of dormancy when the Trump administration did not staff the committee.

²⁸Exec. Order. No. 13689, *Enhancing Coordination of National Efforts in the Arctic*, 80 Fed. Reg. 4191 (Jan. 26, 2015).

achieve something new without providing additional funding, agencies either remain silent or repackage ongoing work to satisfy the request.

In addition, stakeholders from the Experts group raised concerns about AESC's ability to advance U.S. Arctic priorities with its current resources and mission. According to AESC's Executive Director, AESC has two full-time and two part-time staff, and the White House provides additional staff to support AESC's mission at times. However, the Executive Director also told us that AESC did not receive the additional support it requested to facilitate AESC's role in co-leading the development of the implementation plan for the 2022 Arctic Strategy. Because AESC did not receive additional staff, it created four working groups with agency leads to facilitate this effort. Moreover, AESC may not be a natural fit to coordinate a government-wide approach to the region, according to stakeholders from the Experts group. They explained that AESC's original mission did not include the coordination of security issues, and that AESC does not have the mandate to coordinate foreign relations-related Arctic issues.

Although some stakeholders raised concerns about AESC's ability to advance U.S. Arctic priorities, stakeholders from the Other Agencies and Foreign Governments groups applauded AESC's executive leadership. Stakeholders from the Other Agencies group cited the personality and leadership skills of AESC's Executive Director, rather than institutional factors, as a principal driver of AESC's success. Some of these stakeholders elaborated on this idea, attributing AESC's ability to obtain consensus among participating agencies to these factors.

Americans Have Limited Awareness of Arctic Issues and U.S. Government Activities



Stakeholders from four of the six groups discussed Americans' limited awareness of Arctic issues or a broader lack of awareness concerning U.S. government activities in the Arctic. For example, stakeholders from the Foreign Governments group questioned Americans' awareness of Arctic issues and said that the U.S. government and public may need a greater appreciation of the region to fully support the implementation of the Arctic Strategy. A stakeholder from the State of Alaska group also questioned the federal government's understanding of the region, noting that some federal agencies with regional offices that cover Alaska are based in Denver or elsewhere. In addition, stakeholders from the State group said that State and other agencies continue to lack expertise in Arctic issues. With regard to awareness of U.S. government activities in the Arctic, a stakeholder from the Other Agencies group identified a need to increase other federal agencies' and partner countries' understanding

of the work U.S. agencies conduct in the Arctic to improve coordination in the region.

While stakeholders from four of the six groups said that Americans have limited awareness of Arctic issues, some stakeholders also noted that recent increased attention to Arctic issues from policymakers and federal entities has been helpful. For example, one of these stakeholders said that attention from the White House and the Senate has helped to advance the USCG's Polar Security Cutter Program, which will enable the United States to increase its maritime presence in the Arctic.²⁹

Budgetary and Resource Constraints Limit the Federal Government's Advancement of U.S. Arctic Priorities



Budget uncertainties, such as continuing resolutions, and resource constraints affect agencies' ability to plan, coordinate, and implement projects in the Arctic, according to stakeholders from four of the six groups.³⁰ In our prior work, we described the effects of continuing resolutions and shutdowns on agencies, including planning challenges and delayed hiring, which stakeholders from the State and Other Agencies groups we interviewed corroborated.³¹ For example, a stakeholder from the Other Agencies group told us that without an annual appropriation, it is impossible to plan future travel and other events because the agency must develop incremental plans to align with the length of the continuing resolution. If relevant U.S. officials do not attend international events, it limits the U.S. government's ability to push back against strategic competitors who may be promoting interests that do not align with U.S. priorities for the Arctic region, according to a stakeholder from the State group. A stakeholder from the Other Agencies group further stated that small amounts of funding from continuing resolutions

²⁹In partnership with the U.S. Navy, the USCG is procuring three heavy, polar-capable icebreakers ("Polar Security Cutters") to begin to address mission gaps and to expand U.S. presence in both polar regions.

³⁰Federal agencies and programs receive funding through annual appropriation acts. If appropriations are not enacted by the start of the fiscal year, Congress and the President can enact continuing resolutions to fund government agencies and activities and prevent a lapse in appropriations. GAO reported in 2022 that the federal government had operated under one or more continuing resolutions in all but 3 of the last 46 fiscal years (1977-2022). GAO, *Federal Budget: Selected Agencies and Programs Used Strategies to Manage Constraints of Continuing Resolutions*, [GAO-22-104701](#) (Washington, D.C.: June 30, 2022).

³¹[GAO-22-104701](#); *Defense Budget: DOD Has Adopted Practices to Manage within the Constraints of Continuing Resolutions*, [GAO-21-541](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 13, 2021); *Budget Issues: Effects of Budget Uncertainty from Continuing Resolutions on Agency Operations*, [GAO-13-464T](#) (Washington, D.C.: Mar. 13, 2013); and *Continuing Resolutions: Uncertainty Limited Management Options and Increased Workload in Selected Agencies*, [GAO-09-879](#) (Washington, D.C.: Sept. 24, 2009).

are counterproductive and to appear responsive to Congress, agencies prioritize small amounts of funding for accomplishable tasks instead of planning and budgeting for strategic efforts to address larger issues.

Stakeholders from the State and Other Agencies groups also discussed the size of Arctic projects, many of which are large and require multiyear funding. For example, a stakeholder from the Other Agencies group said the government needs to initiate large infrastructure projects in the Arctic to address environmental issues in the region, which require significant funding over multiple years. Another stakeholder from this group discussed how their agency is working with State to take advantage of multiyear appropriations for work with multilateral entities because multilateral entities' projects typically take several years to complete. They further stated that providing more multiyear funding to such projects would further improve U.S. leadership in the Arctic Council.

Additional resource constraints hinder coordination and implementation of U.S. Arctic priorities, according to stakeholders from four of the six groups. For example, stakeholders from the Other Agencies group discussed having limited capacity to participate fully in interagency groups. Some of these stakeholders told us that it is difficult for them to determine where to prioritize limited staff time and resources among a large number of existing interagency groups addressing Arctic issues.³² In addition, stakeholders from the State group said that resources are a constraining factor for engagement in Arctic issues. For example, one of these stakeholders said that decreasing hospitality budgets and increased food costs limit the U.S. government's ability to host diplomatic events overseas—events that provide an opportunity to promote U.S. priorities. Furthermore, a stakeholder from the Foreign Governments group said that the United States does not have resources available to

³²These stakeholders reported difficulties in staffing capacity for participation in various interagency groups, including AESC, APG, and Arctic Council working groups. Capacity issues may decrease after the federal government completes the implementation plan for the 2022 Arctic Strategy. Some stakeholders from the Other Agencies group we interviewed in early 2023 said they participated in frequent meetings and correspondence regarding the development of the implementation plan.

collaborate on certain Arctic projects, such as environmental and risk management projects, with that stakeholder's country.³³

Lastly, stakeholders from the State and Other Agencies groups questioned how the federal government would fund the implementation of the Arctic Strategy.³⁴ For example, one stakeholder said that agencies did not address many goals from the prior Arctic Strategy and corresponding implementation plans because agencies did not have enough resources to address everything. In addition, the stakeholder specifically questioned how the federal government would fund projects that require support from several agencies. Separately, stakeholders from the State group raised concerns about agencies' willingness to bring forward bold ideas to address Arctic priorities without dedicated funding for such efforts.

³³The fiscal year 2024 budget request includes \$53.8 million for the International Fisheries Commissions to fund the United States' anticipated treaty-mandated assessments and other expenses for 19 international commissions and organizations. This amount includes the U.S. share of operating expenses that include the Arctic Council.

³⁴The Executive Director from AESC told us that agencies are required to plan for implementation of national strategies through the annual budget justification process. The official also shared that AESC and others in the White House will advise the Office of Management and Budget about agencies' funding needs for Arctic work related to the 2022 Arctic Strategy.

Stakeholders Identified Three Factors That Facilitate and Two That Hinder State’s Management of U.S. Arctic Priorities but New Ambassador Position Offers Some Optimism

Aspects of State’s Leadership Structure Facilitate U.S. Engagement and Leadership on Arctic Issues

Three factors have facilitated State’s management of U.S. Arctic priorities, according to our analysis of the six stakeholder groups’ perspectives (see fig. 7). These factors include the SAO’s and OES’s effective management of U.S. engagement and leadership in the Arctic Council and the separation between the roles of the SAO and an Arctic coordinator position.

Figure 7: Stakeholders Identified Three Factors That Facilitate the Department of State’s Management of U.S. Arctic Priorities

Factors that facilitate the Department of State’s management of U.S. Arctic priorities	Stakeholder groups that identified each factor
The SAO and OES effectively manage U.S. engagement and leadership in the Arctic Council	
An Arctic coordinator position has improved internal coordination across the broader Arctic portfolio	
Separation between the roles of the SAO and the Arctic coordinator position supports U.S. engagement in the council and on broader issues	

Legend: OES = Bureau of Oceans and International Environmental and Scientific Affairs; SAO = Senior Arctic Official.
 Source: GAO (data); GAO (icons). | GAO-23-106002

The SAO and OES Effectively Manage U.S. Engagement and Leadership in the Arctic Council



The SAO and other OES staff effectively manage U.S. engagement and leadership in the Arctic Council, according to stakeholders from five of the six stakeholder groups. These stakeholder groups said the SAO and its office have effectively managed U.S. engagement at the Arctic Council through coordination with other federal entities participating in council work. Specifically, a stakeholder from the Other Agencies group stated that the SAO helps connect federal entities across the Arctic Council working groups to (1) limit duplication across the working groups and (2) identify opportunities for agencies to provide subject matter expertise to support working groups. Other stakeholders from this group cited guidance from and information sharing coordinated by the SAO and its office. One of these stakeholders said they relied on the SAO and others at State for guidance on how to address diplomatic challenges within the Arctic Council following Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, for example. Moreover, the SAO’s ability to provide expert knowledge on a topic quickly attests to the office’s effective coordination with other relevant agencies, according to a stakeholder from the Foreign Governments group.

Frequent and open communication between OES staff and external stakeholders also facilitates Arctic Council-related engagement, according to stakeholders from the Foreign Governments and Alaska Native Organizations groups. For example, stakeholders from the Alaska Native Organizations group said that they frequently discuss Arctic Council issues with the SAO outside of council meetings. One of these stakeholders commented that State rarely surprises their organization because of its level of engagement with the SAO. This stakeholder further asserted that their organization feels “heard” when it engages with the SAO. However, another stakeholder from the Alaska Native Organizations group said that their organization does not believe the head of delegation for one of the council working groups fully accepts their organization as part of the U.S. delegation. Because the organization serves as one of the Permanent Participants, they want State to clarify their organization’s role on council working groups.

Moreover, the SAO and OES staff have promoted U.S. leadership within the Arctic Council, according to stakeholders from four of the six groups. For example, some of these stakeholders commented that institutional knowledge within the SAO position and office has facilitated U.S. leadership at the Arctic Council. Specifically, a stakeholder from the Other Agencies group explained that a prior SAO and staff within the SAO’s office had developed vast knowledge about the Arctic Council, including the history behind U.S. and Arctic Council decisions. The stakeholder

added that such knowledge facilitates U.S. efforts to promote its priorities on the council.

In addition, stakeholders from three groups—State, Experts, and Foreign Governments—specifically said the United States has been effective within the Arctic Council without an ambassador-level SAO. However, a stakeholder from the Other Agencies group stated that the United States could have more influence if a higher-level official represented the United States at the Arctic Council. Similarly, a stakeholder from the Experts group said that because the United States does not have an ambassador-level SAO like most of the other Arctic countries, it creates an odd diplomatic relationship with other Arctic countries. This stakeholder suggested that the new Ambassador-at-Large for the Arctic Region take over the SAO portfolio.

An Arctic Coordinator Position Has Improved Internal Coordination across the Broader Arctic Portfolio



The creation of a position to coordinate the broader Arctic portfolio has improved internal coordination within State, according to stakeholders from two of the six groups. Stakeholders from the State and Foreign Governments groups told us that the Arctic encompasses a broad set of issues, including energy, climate, defense, and sustainable development, that requires a broad range of expertise that spans the department. According to one stakeholder from the State group, key Arctic players in the department did not talk to each other prior to the creation of the coordinator position. The coordinator position served as a mediator between various areas of the State bureaucracy with Arctic functions. Another stakeholder from the State group explained that the coordinator position afforded the department insight into all bureaus, enabling the coordinator to understand how several Arctic issues are interrelated. For example, the coordinator identified how some Arctic security issues affect environmental discussions because of the position's broad reach across the department. This stakeholder further noted that identifying these interrelated issues helps State bureaus avoid working in silos.

Separation between the Roles of the SAO and the Arctic Coordinator Position Supports U.S. Engagement in the Council and on Broader Issues



The existing State structure—in which OES focuses on the Arctic Council portfolio while another office (currently the Office of the U.S. Coordinator) coordinates the broader Arctic portfolio within State—supports U.S. engagement both in the council and on broader issues, according to stakeholders from three of the six stakeholder groups. For example, one stakeholder from the State group explained that the current structure allows one office to focus on the Arctic Council and develop institutional knowledge, which is important for long-term U.S. relationships with other Arctic countries. Because the SAO addresses the technical aspects of the Arctic Council, its willingness to participate fully in the day-to-day management of council work supports U.S. government engagement on the council, according to a stakeholder from the Other Agencies group. In contrast, it was useful for the coordinator position and associated office to coordinate with various experts across the agency on Arctic issues more broadly because the Arctic Council does not traditionally deal with security issues, according to a stakeholder from the State group.

Moreover, stakeholders from the Foreign Governments group said that the U.S. role in the Arctic is too big for any one person to cover both of these portfolios. One of these stakeholders stated that the growing number of non-Arctic countries with Arctic interests and Arctic-related issue areas indicates a growing need for engagement on Arctic issues outside of the Arctic Council. According to this stakeholder, it makes sense that the United States would have a separate Arctic lead that could address Arctic issues more broadly than the SAO.

However, three stakeholders from the Experts and Foreign Governments groups offered a different perspective. Two stakeholders from the Foreign Governments group stated that the existing State structure may lead to inefficiencies. The stakeholder from the Experts group further noted that the United States is at a disadvantage when the office coordinating the broader Arctic portfolio is not involved in the “nuts and bolts” of policy development on Arctic cooperation at the Arctic Council.

Gaps in Leadership and Limited Convening Authority of the Coordinator Position Hinder State’s Management of U.S. Arctic Priorities

Two factors have hindered State’s management of U.S. Arctic priorities, according to our analysis of the six stakeholder groups’ perspectives (see fig. 8). These factors include gaps in State leadership and staff coordinating the broader Arctic portfolio and limited convening authority for this position.

Figure 8: Stakeholders Identified Two Factors That Hinder the Department of State's Management of U.S. Arctic Priorities

Factors that hinder the Department of State's management of U.S. Arctic priorities	Stakeholder groups that identified each factor
Gaps in leadership and staff coordinating the broader Arctic portfolio have limited State's engagement outside the Arctic Council	
Prior positions coordinating the broader Arctic portfolio lacked convening authority	

Department of State
 Other Agencies
 Experts
 Foreign Governments
 Alaska Native Organizations
 State of Alaska

Source: GAO (data); GAO (icons). | GAO-23-106002

Gaps in Leadership and in Staff Coordinating the Broader Arctic Portfolio Have Limited State's Engagement outside the Arctic Council



Gaps in leadership and in staff responsible for coordinating the broader Arctic portfolio have limited State's efforts outside the Arctic Council, according to stakeholders from four of the six groups. For example, stakeholders from the State group said that gaps in leadership led to fragmented efforts. Specifically, one of these stakeholders told us that State loses momentum on Arctic issues with constant changes in leadership and staffing. This stakeholder explained that during the transition between the Arctic coordinator position and the establishment of an Ambassador-at-Large for the Arctic Region position, the existing coordinator's office lost all but one staff member and that the office is moving backward during this gap in leadership. Other stakeholders from the State and Other Agencies groups echoed this perspective to some extent, with one stakeholder from the Other Agencies group stating that the agency's interaction with the coordinator's office has decreased during this transition period.

Gaps in Arctic leadership at State limit U.S. engagement with other Arctic countries on broader issues outside of the Arctic Council, according to stakeholders from the Foreign Governments group. For example, two of these stakeholders said that although the Counselor has elevated Arctic issues within State since the departure of the U.S. Coordinator in June 2022, the Counselor's high rank within State limits foreign governments' engagement with the Counselor at the working level. One of these stakeholders commented that there is no one person at State who can discuss broader Arctic issues at a working level. According to this stakeholder, the other six like-minded Arctic countries discuss broader Arctic issues together, and they wish the United States had someone who could engage in those discussions consistently.

Prior Positions Coordinating the Broader Arctic Portfolio Lacked Convening Authority



Prior positions coordinating the broader Arctic portfolio had limited convening authority to, for example, bring decision makers together or quickly address informational needs, according to stakeholders from four of the six groups. Some of these stakeholders attributed this limitation to a lack of clarity regarding the coordinator positions' roles within the agency. For example, a stakeholder from the Experts group told us that without a clear directive from the Secretary of State concerning the role and authority of such positions, the coordinator had limited ability to develop relationships across relevant bureaus. This stakeholder stated that limited internal coordination among relevant bureaus weakened State's efforts to speak and act with one voice.

Others attributed the lack of convening power to the coordinator positions' stature within the agency. For example, a stakeholder from the State group said that the prior U.S. Coordinator did not have a direct reporting line to the Secretary, which contributed to internal coordination issues. Some bureaus responded more slowly to requests from the U.S. Coordinator or the coordinator's office than they would to requests sent by officials with a direct line to the Secretary, according to this stakeholder. According to a stakeholder from the Experts group, the prior U.S. Coordinator did "advance the narrative on a number of Arctic issues" because of his inclusive approach and personality, but did not have the stature or explicit authority to fully address the responsibilities of the position. The stakeholder further noted that it is difficult to bring a large number of people together, including people at the assistant secretary and higher ranks, when relying solely on personality.

Moreover, stakeholders from the State and Foreign Governments groups compared the convening power of the prior U.S. Coordinator with that of the Counselor, who assumed senior-level oversight of Arctic policy and coordination throughout the department following the U.S. Coordinator's departure in June 2022. Specifically, some of the stakeholders from the State group told us that the Counselor has obtained high-level engagement from relevant bureaus at monthly coordination meetings, including through assistant secretaries and deputy assistant secretaries. One of these stakeholders commented that it was unlikely that all the relevant State bureaus would have attended such meetings if convened by the prior U.S. Coordinator, because that person held a lower status within the department and some officials may not have felt it was as important to attend. Another stakeholder from this group further noted that the Counselor has managed to bring other bureaus into Arctic-related discussions, bureaus that previously ignored broader Arctic discussions. In addition, stakeholders from the Foreign Governments group said they

assume the Counselor's higher level of authority meant that State addressed Arctic-related requests faster than it had previously under the U.S. Coordinator.

Stakeholders Expressed Optimism about the New Ambassador Position but Suggested State Consider Certain Elements for It to Be Effective

Stakeholders from the State, Other Agencies, Experts, Foreign Governments, and the Alaska Native Organizations groups viewed the announcement of the Ambassador-at-Large for the Arctic Region (Ambassador) position positively. Some stakeholders noted that the announcement served as a positive sign of increased U.S. interest in the region, while others focused on the implied benefits of such a position. For example, according to stakeholders from the Foreign Governments group, the announcement is a strong sign of the continued importance that the U.S. government places on the Arctic and such a position may raise the status of Arctic issues in the United States. In addition, stakeholders from the Alaska Native Organizations group said that such a position is important for the entire nation because the U.S. government needs someone who can communicate how Arctic issues affect the rest of the country to move Arctic policy forward.

Some stakeholders mentioned additional benefits that may come from having an Arctic Ambassador position. For example, a stakeholder from the Other Agencies group said that having a senior-level, Senate-confirmed Arctic official at State may facilitate U.S. Arctic leadership by bringing disparate Arctic messages together under one voice. This stakeholder stated that although relevant bureaus at State interact well on Arctic messaging, it would be useful for U.S. allies and partners to channel all those voices into one voice through the Ambassador. Moreover, stakeholders from the Other Agencies, Experts, and Foreign Governments groups anticipate that the Ambassador will serve as State's single point of contact for broader Arctic issues.

However, many stakeholders identified elements State and the new Ambassador should consider to manage U.S. Arctic priorities successfully going forward. These are:

- **Consistency in position title and corresponding office.** State should create a consistent position and office responsible for coordinating the broader Arctic portfolio that would span administrations, according to stakeholders from four of the six groups. Some of these stakeholders said that such a change would lead to greater institutional knowledge on the issues and support better working relationships across State, while others said that it would improve engagement with U.S. foreign partners.

- **A formalized office structure with a “deep bench.”** Stakeholders from three of the six groups highlighted the need to create a formal office structure to support the Ambassador. Creating this structure would include assembling a group of staff that can support the office’s efforts during a gap in leadership, an action one stakeholder referred to as “building a deep bench.” One stakeholder from the State group said that other State bureaus have developed such a structure so that someone can step in as an acting leader when needed. According to this stakeholder, State did not develop a plan for filling the leadership void within S/AR prior to the departure of the U.S. Coordinator, and State has not conducted long-term planning for the Arctic office structure. As previously noted, S/AR hired an additional full-time employee who started in April 2023 and has vacancies for a staff assistant and a chief of staff that it plans to fill when the Ambassador comes on board, while it hopes to hire an additional policy advisor in the future.³⁵
- **Clarity of Ambassador’s role within the department.** State should clarify the Ambassador’s role in relation to other bureaus and offices, according to stakeholders from three of the six groups. For example, a stakeholder from the Experts group stated that Ambassador-at-Large positions blur management lines within State and suggested that the Secretary of State define the Ambassador role in clear and specific terms, with concrete objectives. This stakeholder suggested, for example, that the Secretary of State require assistant secretaries to meet regularly with the Ambassador to discuss Arctic issues.
- **Greater authority within State.** The Ambassador should have greater authority to effectively coordinate within State, according to stakeholders from four of the six stakeholder groups. Some of these stakeholders assume that the ambassadorial title and the Senate-confirmed position will carry more weight than the prior U.S. Coordinator position, and that such authority will provide the convening authority needed to bring everyone together. Other stakeholders focused on the need for the Ambassador to have clear and direct authority, such as that provided by direct access to the Secretary of State. According to State officials, the Ambassador’s office will be located in the Office of the Secretary, and the Ambassador will report to the Secretary or the Secretary’s designee.

Rank and Reporting Line of Ambassadors-at-Large

According to a 2017 Congressional Research Service report, Ambassadors-at-Large generally rank immediately below assistant secretaries of State in terms of protocol, but their reporting line is not consistent. In 2017, two of the four Ambassador-at-Large positions at State reported directly to the Secretary of State while the other two reported to an Under Secretary.

Source: GAO analysis of Congressional Research Service report. | GAO-23-106002

³⁵According to State officials, the department has prioritized funding for the Ambassador-at-Large for the Arctic Region. Specifically, the fiscal year 2023 Diplomatic Programs Operating Plan includes \$500,000 in OES appropriations to support the activities of the Ambassador. In addition, the department is making \$2.0 million in fiscal year 2023 Diplomatic Program funds available to support the activities of the Ambassador.

Agency Comments

We provided a draft of this report to State, DOD, DOE, DOI, EPA, NOAA within Commerce, USCG within DHS, and AESC for review and comment. State, DOD, DOI, and EPA did not have any comments on the report. DOE, NOAA, USCG, and AESC provided technical comments, which we incorporated, as appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the appropriate congressional committees; the Secretaries of State, Commerce, Defense, Energy, Homeland Security, and Interior; the Administrator of EPA; the Executive Director of AESC; and other interested parties. In addition, the report is available at no charge on the GAO website at <https://www.gao.gov>.

If you or your staff have any questions about this report, please contact me at (202) 512-2964 or kenneyc@gao.gov. Contact points for our Offices of Congressional Relations and Public Affairs may be found on the last page of this report. GAO staff who made key contributions to this report are listed in appendix V.



Chelsa L. Kenney
Director, International Affairs and Trade

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

This report examines (1) federal entities' roles in managing U.S. Arctic priorities, (2) factors stakeholders identified that may facilitate or hinder the federal government's management of U.S. Arctic priorities, and (3) factors stakeholders identified that may facilitate or hinder the Department of State's role in managing U.S. Arctic priorities.

To describe federal entities' roles in managing U.S. Arctic priorities, we reviewed relevant federal strategies, relevant agencies' Arctic strategies—including the Departments of Defense and Energy and the U.S. Coast Guard within the Department of Homeland Security, relevant sections of State's *Foreign Affairs Manual*, other State documentation, and reports produced by federal entities and think tanks. We interviewed officials from various federal entities, including the Departments of State, Defense, Energy, and the Interior, and the U.S. Coast Guard, Environmental Protection Agency, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration within the Department of Commerce. We also interviewed an official from the Arctic Executive Steering Committee, located within the White House's Office of Science and Technology Policy, about the Committee's current initiatives and its role in co-leading the development of the implementation plan for the 2022 National Strategy for the Arctic Region.

To identify and describe factors that may facilitate or hinder (1) the federal government's management of U.S. Arctic priorities and (2) State's role in managing those priorities, we selected and interviewed 31 stakeholders. We selected these 31 stakeholders across six groups to capture a range of perspectives. We grouped similar stakeholders together on the basis of their affiliations to create these six groups for the purposes of our analysis and discussion. We did not meet with all the stakeholders within a given group simultaneously.

The six groups and the criteria for selecting stakeholders within these groups are described in table 4 below.

Table 4: Stakeholder Groups GAO Interviewed and the Criteria for Selecting Stakeholders within These Groups

Stakeholder group name (number of stakeholders)	Selection criteria and data collection methodologies
Department of State (9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li data-bbox="532 1730 1511 1782">• We selected nine State bureaus with Arctic roles on the basis of our review of State's <i>Foreign Affairs Manual</i> and input from interviews with State officials.^a<li data-bbox="532 1787 1511 1843">• We collected insights from officials in the nine selected bureaus through semi-structured interviews and written responses.

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Stakeholder group name (number of stakeholders)	Selection criteria and data collection methodologies
Other Agencies (6)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We selected six additional federal agencies on the basis of multiple selection criteria, including the entities' involvement in the Arctic Council, involvement in current initiatives coordinated by the Arctic Executive Steering Committee, development of agency-specific Arctic strategies, and input from U.S. experts on the Arctic. • The additional six key federal entities include the Departments of Defense, Energy, and the Interior, the U.S. Coast Guard within the Department of Homeland Security, Environmental Protection Agency, and National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration within the Department of Commerce. • We collected insights from officials from the six other selected federal agencies through semi-structured interviews and written responses.
Experts (7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We identified and selected seven U.S. experts on Arctic issues through several steps: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We initially compiled a list of 35 experts with expertise in Arctic issues or in U.S. government diplomacy in the Arctic through various methods, including internet searches using certain search terms, news and literature reviews, and identification of speakers participating in Arctic-specific seminars or conferences. • We organized the list of experts into five groups based on their current affiliation—academics, practitioners, retired federal employees who previously worked on Arctic issues, non-governmental organizations, and think tanks. • We then reviewed a number of different inputs—current affiliation, past affiliations, published work, education, training or degrees, and years and type of experience—to determine (1) the level of expertise of the individual, including how the individual's unique and diverse perspective would contribute to the success of the panel overall, and (2) their ability to speak to State's organizational structure for Arctic policy and programs. • On the basis of this information, we selected 10 experts to participate in an expert panel. Four experts were unavailable to participate in the panel. • Ultimately, six experts participated in a panel discussion and we interviewed a seventh expert separately due to scheduling complications and an inability to participate in the panel discussion. • We also obtained written responses to follow-up questions from some of the experts.
Foreign Governments (5)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We selected foreign government representatives from five of the seven other Arctic countries. We collected insights from these representatives through semi-structured interviews. • State is currently limited in its ability to engage with Russia. Since State typically facilitates GAO's engagement with other countries, we decided not to obtain the perspectives of Russia for this report. We contacted representatives from the remaining Arctic country, but we did not have an opportunity to interview officials from that country because of scheduling conflicts.
Alaska Native Organizations (3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • We conducted semi-structured interviews with leaders of three of the four Permanent Participant organizations that represent Alaska Natives in the Arctic Council.^b • To select Permanent Participant organizations that represent Alaska Natives in the Arctic Council, we first identified all Permanent Participant organizations. Of the six Permanent Participants, we selected the four organizations that have Alaskan representation, which include the Aleut International Association, Arctic Athabaskan Council, Gwich'in Council International, and Inuit Circumpolar Council. • Officials that we interviewed from the Permanent Participant organizations also represented an Alaska Native regional nonprofit corporation, an Alaska Native regional for-profit corporation, and an Alaska Native Village.

Appendix I: Objectives, Scope, and Methodology

Stakeholder group name (number of stakeholders)	Selection criteria and data collection methodologies
State of Alaska (1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> We reached out to Alaska’s Office of the Lieutenant Governor and met with representatives from that office and three state government departments, including the departments of environmental conservation, natural resources, and fish and game. We collected insights from these officials through one semi-structured interview.

Source: GAO. | GAO-23-106002

^aThis group includes stakeholders from eight bureaus and one office, the Office of the U.S. Coordinator for the Arctic Region, which is not located within a bureau. We will refer to all nine bureaus and offices as “bureaus” for this report.

^bAlthough we reached out to all four Permanent Participant organizations that represent Alaska Natives, we were unable to meet with one of the organizations because of scheduling conflicts.

Because the number of participants in our meetings varied by stakeholder, we considered and included collective inputs from all the participants that attended a meeting as the perspectives from one stakeholder. However, we considered each expert we interviewed or that participated in our panel discussion as individual stakeholders. Thus, we discuss the results from the 31 stakeholders (regardless of the number of people participating on behalf of each stakeholder)—nine State bureaus, six other agencies, seven experts,¹ five foreign governments, three Alaska Native organizations, and one state government (Alaska). As previously discussed, we grouped similar stakeholders together on the basis of their affiliations to create six groups for our analysis and reporting.

We asked participants in our interviews and the expert panel a similar set of questions about any factors that may facilitate or hinder (1) the federal government’s management of U.S. Arctic priorities and (2) State’s management of U.S. Arctic priorities and diplomatic engagement. We also asked the participants about any actions the federal government or State could take to address any factors that hinder management of U.S. Arctic priorities. We phrased these topics as open-ended questions to allow participants to discuss any factor without limiting their options. A trained moderator helped facilitate the expert panel, and multiple analysts took notes for this event. We conducted semi-structured interviews to collect information from the other stakeholders.

Next, we conducted a content analysis of responses across the six stakeholder groups and coded responses into categories to identify common themes within and across groups pertaining to factors that

¹See appendix IV for a list of the experts who participated in the expert panel we convened.

facilitate or hinder the federal government's or State's efforts. A second analyst reviewed coding assigned to each response to ensure comments were consistently and appropriately coded. On the basis of our content analyses, we quantified the number of stakeholders within each group that identified each factor. We presented those factors that two or more stakeholder groups identified.

Not all stakeholder groups interviewed have equal insight into the federal government's or State's management of U.S. Arctic priorities and the stakeholder groups may have varying priorities. As such, different stakeholder groups may have emphasized varying factors concerning the management of U.S. Arctic priorities. In addition, we conducted these interviews at different times. As a result, the stakeholder groups may not have had an opportunity to comment on the same set of federal government or State actions, such as the development of the implementation plan for the 2022 National Strategy for the Arctic Region that began in December 2022. Although the data we collected from the 31 stakeholders across the six groups provide insight into the perspectives of various groups, our findings are not generalizable beyond these stakeholders.

We sent the 16 non-federal stakeholders (stakeholders within the Experts, Foreign Governments, Alaska Native Organizations, and State of Alaska groups) relevant excerpts of the draft report for their review for accuracy and incorporated any technical comments, as appropriate.

We conducted this performance audit from May 2022 to September 2023 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards. Those standards require that we plan and perform the audit to obtain sufficient, appropriate evidence to provide a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives. We believe that the evidence obtained provides a reasonable basis for our findings and conclusions based on our audit objectives.

Appendix II: U.S. Participation in Arctic Council Working Groups as of June 2023

Table 5: U.S. Participation in Arctic Council Working Groups as of June 2023, Including Heads of Delegation and Full-time Equivalent Totals^a

Executive Branch Departments/ Agencies	Arctic Contaminants Action Program Working Group	Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme Working Group	Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna Working Group	Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response Working Group	Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment Working Group	Sustainable Development Working Group
Department of Commerce, National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration	-	√, 2	1	1	√, 6	-
Department of Energy, National Nuclear Security Administration	-	-	-	2	-	-
Department of Health and Human Services, Centers for Disease Control and Prevention	-	-	-	-	-	1
Department of Homeland Security, U.S. Coast Guard	-	-	-	√, 4	-	-
Department of the Interior (DOI), Bureau of Land Management	-	-	1	-	-	-
DOI, Bureau of Ocean Energy Management	-	-	1	-	-	-
DOI, Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement	-	-	-	1	-	-
DOI, National Park Service	-	-	2	-	-	-
DOI, U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service	-	-	√, 3	-	-	-
DOI, U.S. Geological Survey	-	-	1	-	-	-
Department of State	-	-	-	-	-	√, 2
Environmental Protection Agency	√, 4	-	-	-	-	-
National Science Foundation	-	-	-	-	-	1

Appendix II: U.S. Participation in Arctic Council Working Groups as of June 2023

Executive Branch Departments/ Agencies	Arctic Contaminants Action Program Working Group	Arctic Monitoring and Assessment Programme Working Group	Conservation of Arctic Flora and Fauna Working Group	Emergency Prevention, Preparedness and Response Working Group	Protection of the Arctic Marine Environment Working Group	Sustainable Development Working Group
Totals	4	2	9	8	6	3

Legend: √ = head of delegation; - = not applicable

Source: Department of State. | GAO-23-106002

Note: Other federal entities participate in or support Arctic Council working groups outside of those listed in the table, but these entities do not dedicate full-time equivalent employees for such participation.

*The number of full-time equivalent employees is determined by dividing the total number of hours of service for which wages were paid by the employer to employees during the taxable year by 2,080 (40 hours x 52 weeks = 2,080 hours).

Appendix III: Arctic Policy Group Participants as of June 2023

Table 6: Arctic Policy Group Participants as of June 2023

Executive Office of the President	
	National Security Council
	Office of Science and Technology Policy
	U.S. Global Change Research Program
Federal agencies	
Department of Commerce	National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration
Department of Defense	Joint Base Elmendorf-Richardson
	Joint Chiefs of Staff
	Office of the Secretary of Defense
	U.S. Air Force
	U.S. European Command
	U.S. Navy
	U.S. Northern Command
Department of Energy	Arctic Energy Office
	National Nuclear Security Administration
	Office of International Affairs
	Office of Science
Department of Health and Human Services	Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
	National Institutes of Health
	Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration
Department of Homeland Security	Headquarters
	Federal Emergency Management Agency
	U.S. Coast Guard
Department of the Interior	Bureau of Indian Affairs
	Bureau of Land Management–North Slope Science Initiative
	Bureau of Ocean Energy Management
	Bureau of Safety and Environmental Enforcement
	National Park Service
	Office of the Secretary
	U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service
	U.S. Geological Survey
Department of Justice	–
Department of State	–
Department of Transportation	Federal Aviation Administration

**Appendix III: Arctic Policy Group Participants
as of June 2023**

	Maritime Administration
Other federal entities	
	Environmental Protection Agency
	Marine Mammal Commission
	National Aeronautics and Space Administration
	National Science Foundation
	Smithsonian Institution
	U.S. Agency for International Development
	U.S. Arctic Research Commission

Source: Department of State. | GAO-23-106002

Appendix IV: Expert Panel Participants

The following individuals participated virtually in GAO's Expert stakeholder group:¹

- Evan T. Bloom, Wilson Center
- Dr. Lawson W. Brigham, Global Fellow, Wilson Center & Researcher, University of Alaska Fairbanks
- Heather Conley, The German Marshall Fund of the United States
- Julia Gourley, U.S. Senior Arctic Official, 2005–2019 and U.S. Department of State
- David M. Kennedy, Commissioner, U.S. Arctic Research Commission; National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA) Arctic Senior Advisor, Retired; NOAA Deputy Under Secretary for Operations, Retired
- Dr. Michael Sfraga, Chair, U.S. Arctic Research Commission; Chair, Polar Institute, Wilson Center²
- Frances (Fran) Ulmer, Former Lieutenant Governor of Alaska (1994–2002); Chair of U.S. Arctic Research Commission (2011–2020); Chancellor of University of Alaska Anchorage; Special Advisor on Arctic Science and Policy at the Department of State (2014–2017); Senior Fellow of the Arctic Initiative in the Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center (2019–2022)

¹Six experts participated in a panel discussion on September 16, 2022, and we interviewed a seventh expert separately because of scheduling complications and an inability to participate in the panel discussion.

²The President nominated Dr. Sfraga for the Ambassador-at-Large for the Arctic Region position in February 2023.

Appendix V: GAO Contact and Staff Acknowledgments

GAO Contact

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Staff Acknowledgments

In addition to the contact named above, Godwin Agbara (Assistant Director), James Michels (Assistant Director), Amanda Bartine (Analyst-in-Charge), Debbie Chung, Anna Sophia Lindholm, Chris Keblitis, and Alyssa Skarbek made key contributions to this report. K. Nicole Willems, Justin Fisher, and Terry Richardson provided technical assistance.

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